WELCOME

I'm Dr. Alex, and this is my book *Happy Habits*, an introduction to all the **small things** you can do **every day** that make **big things happen**. Thanks for opening up this book, and well done – reading's a *great* habit to get into.

It's not an instruction manual and it's not a schoolbook, don't worry! What I want to share with you are what I call Happy Habits. They are a set of ideas I use that I think would help everyone spend their time in ways that will make all their dreams come true.

Neil Armstrong, the first person who walked on the Moon, was once a kid who made a habit of concentrating in his science class. Any rugby player you can think of would have made a habit of throwing and catching whenever they could. Taylor Swift will have sung in the shower.

And they did it again. And again. And again. Each time they got better, and things got easier. Their happy habit became their happy life. Their dream didn't just become a reality – **their reality made their dreams come true**.

So that's why I wanted to write this book. To show you how the happy little things you do today are what helps make a happy life.

So let's get started. Just getting started is one of the best habits we can have.



INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO YOU DO BEST?

If you had to think of something that you enjoy, that you are good at, and that makes you feel proud of yourself, what would you say?

I would say I feel good at running because I have trained for a marathon, or that I know lots of facts about the human body because I studied to become a doctor.

Maybe you are good at scoring goals. Or drawing horses. Maybe you're good at remembering the names of thousands of items in *Minecraft*. Think of that thing you have become good at.



How do you feel when you are doing it?

Pretty good.

How do you feel about the fact that you *can* do it?

Proud.

And were you always able to do it?

No. I got better over time.

You see, we all have skills that we are proud of, that make us feel happy and that we got better at over time. The question is, how did we get better? And if we want to discover *other* things to enjoy and be proud of, how can we learn to do them?

The answer is – you guessed it (it's in the name of the book!):

HABITS.

A habit is something that we do often. It is also the **best way** to get better at something. So you found a habit – shooting footballs, drawing manes or remembering dragon eggs (I *think* that's from *Minecraft* . . .) and you did it a few times a week for a few years.

In that time, you went from being someone who could only kick a ball a few metres to someone who could take a corner.

You went from someone who could draw the outline of a horse to someone who could make it look pretty realistic.

You went from knowing about one item, to ten, to a thousand.

You formed a habit, and your habit made you happy because you learned to like doing it. Then, you felt proud of what you could do. I'll bet then that your habit probably didn't feel like something you had to remind yourself to do. You saw a football and would just start playing, or noticed your brown pencil and thought, *Time to draw a horse.*

It was *automatic.* This means that, unlike chores, you didn't need a big reminder or encouragement to do it. It just sort of happened, and as you got better, you felt more confident and more excited to do it again and again and again.

Because the best habits are automatic. We have to think about doing them for a bit but then, soon enough, we start doing them without even thinking. I want to tell you how you can make lots of good habits automatic.

Once we make our happy habits something we do without thinking, there is no question of how far we can go.

HOW FAR DO YOU WANT TO GO?

So you've thought about the things you have already improved at.

I'm guessing you have only had a couple of years to develop these skills. But you must have started to feel pretty good with the practice you've had – you should do!

Now imagine that rather than five years of practice, you've had twenty. Or instead of six months, it was sixty YEARS. That's a lot of goals or drawing or gaming! By the time you're done, you'll probably be scoring from the halfway line or creating life-size horse sculptures that look real.



The habits you start or continue today could result in some amazing happiness and unbelievable levels of skill in your future. So if you can, don't imagine the future as some faraway time when you are old and grizzly – think of it as a moment that begins today. The future is the version of you that is getting better, starting from right now.

So let's think about what you would like to be able to do *someday.*

LET'S DRAW A PICTURE OF THE FUTURE YOU.

➔ Would you like to be happy? Someone who laughs a lot?

➔ What would you like to do for a job?

➔ What skills would you like to have?

Adults always ask kids the question, 'What would you like to be when you grow up?' so you might already have an answer. But what they *don't* usually ask is what are you doing ***today*** to make that happen.

Successful inventors aren't at the top of their field because they said, 'I want to be a successful inventor' – they are there because they have developed their ideas, tested them and worked to make them the best they can be over time (sometimes years!).

The things you will achieve in your life don't just magically happen when you're a grown-up. They happen when you keep improving at some things from when you are a child because you have formed a habit.

You don't *become* a footballer on the day you score in the Premier League – you *become* one on the day you decide to start practising like one.

Say, for example, you answered the questions above like this:

➔ **Would you like to be happy? Someone who laughs a lot?**

Yes . . . and yes . . . LOL! (Sorry. I was just practising laughing – it's a good habit!)

➔ **What would you like to do for a job?**

I would like to be a marine biologist

➔ **What skills would you like to have?**

I would like to be able to scuba-dive.

OK, so you want to be a **healthy**, **happy**, **laughing**, **scuba-diving marine biologist**.

Great choice. But how do you become one?



Well, this book is split into seven separate sections: **Move**, **Nourish**, **Rest**, **Plan**, **Joy**, **Connect** and **Breathe/Reflect**, with each section containing inspiration and advice on how to pick up small habits that grow into the bigger ones that make us happy – because **who you want to be *someday* is a result of what you do *today*.** Nothing massive, nothing hard – just finding little habits that make you happy and help you grow.

So, to become a marine biologist, you might need to take small daily habits from each section to help you work towards that goal. This might look like planning how you're going to learn all the fishy facts and nautical know-how you'll need, or making sure you're getting enough rest to keep your body and brain in tip-top shape – whatever feels good to you!

But before we get too far into how picking up these happy habits works, let's just read that last bit again:

Whatever feels good to you.

Every single person on this planet is unique. There may be sections of this book that you don't connect with, or which you need to adapt in order to suit your individual needs – this is especially true if you have either a physical disability or a neurodivergence diagnosis, such as ADHD, dyslexia, autism or dyspraxia. If some of the advice or habits listed in this book don't feel good to you, it's absolutely fine to park them for now and try something else. I'd always suggest talking through anything you are finding challenging with your grown-ups or healthcare team though, to see if there are strategies you can put in place to get the best from these happy habits.

We will talk in more detail about how happy habits work in each section, as I know that right now it might sound like a lot of things to put together. But the cool thing is that **every few minutes you spend on a habit you enjoy makes that habit even more effective and even easier the next time.**



WHY I WANT TO TELL YOU ALL THIS

Because happy habits changed my life, and when I was a kid, I didn't really understand how helpful they could be.

I used to think you were either a person with good habits or a person with bad ones. You can probably guess which one I felt like most of the time.

School was really hard for me. I struggled to sit still and concentrate. Reading and writing were difficult, and I never finished my work on time. It made me feel left out and different from my classmates. I became shy and too scared to get involved in things I would really have liked to do, like playing sports or going to birthday parties.

I mostly felt worried. A LOT. I worried that my teachers thought I wasn't good enough. That my parents thought I was lazy. That the kids in my class didn't like me. I didn't know what to do, and I didn't think there was anything I could change. Whenever I was told off for a 'bad habit', like doing my homework late or having too much screen time, I just thought it was another sign that people didn't think I was good enough.

I thought that good habits just sounded boring. Eating vegetables, going to bed early and making sure my homework was done on time all seemed like the opposite of fun. They seemed like they were just things getting in the way of having a good time or being happy.

This meant I felt stuck. I felt bad. I didn't have any good habits, and no one had explained to me that habits might just be the thing to make me feel better.

I felt worried that people thought I was lazy, and I felt sad when I got lower marks than my classmates. But I also *didn't want* to do hard work, and I didn't believe I could get better marks. So, I thought I would always be disappointed and that it was just my personality. I thought I would never find habits that worked for me and that I would always be someone who let himself – and other people – down.



SPOILER: I WAS WRONG

As it turned out, I was completely wrong. I learned that just a few small habits – nothing too hard – made the bigger ones feel manageable. Every little thing I did made the next one easier. Soon, the hard things in my life became easy. I started to do better, feel better and be happier.

It became clear that I *was* good enough, and **habits** were a key part of that. **They weren't the *problem*; they were the *solution.***

I didn't need to worry about being lazy; I had to learn habits which helped me work better and smarter. I didn't need to worry about playing sports – I had to give them a try and learn how happy they could make me.

I realized that habits weren't *hard* things, but *happy* ones. Small changes that add up to big things. In my personal life and through my work as a doctor and mental-health ambassador, I've realized that developing the right habits in the right way is an amazing tool for our well-being. Repeatedly 'doing' a helpful habit is good for us now, but also helpful for next time because a habit gets easier each time we do it.

As our habits get easier to do, they become something we don't even have to think about. Do you have to think about getting dressed?



No – you have done it so often that it comes naturally (though you might have to give a bit more thought to what you're actually going to wear!). As a result, you can do other things *while getting dressed* – you can sing, have a chat or think about the world's smallest cat (her name is Lillieput, and she is a breed called a 'munchkin'). When an activity or behaviour becomes a habit, we make space in our minds to add things on top of it.

We can practise new skills, get better at old ones and feel proud of ourselves for choosing to do it.

But we have to remember, our **habits aren't about being good or bad**. They aren't right or wrong, lazy or perfect. Our habits are just about being happy. We all have an idea of the sort of person we want to be, and who we are is the result of our habits.

We feel proud when we do something that feels hard now in order to get better in the future.

We won't always get our habits just right because no one is perfect. The best solution is to try to do the right thing for ourselves, our bodies and our minds with small, positive decisions. We don't need to try to be perfect though; we just have to try and be kind to ourselves, and then, bit by bit, step by step, we'll start becoming the best we can possibly be.

It takes time, but boy, is it worth it.

So don't worry if you start slowly. Don't feel guilty if you sometimes forget to follow your routine or have a bad day. The great thing about habits is that they are for a lifetime, and you have your whole life to see which ones make you feel good. You just have to try.



The first step is to think about who you want to be. The second is to think about what habits make someone like that. The third is to work out a way to make those habits *easy* to commit to and do *every day*.

Then, all you have to do is *live*. It's a great habit.

Let's start by thinking about how we form habits.



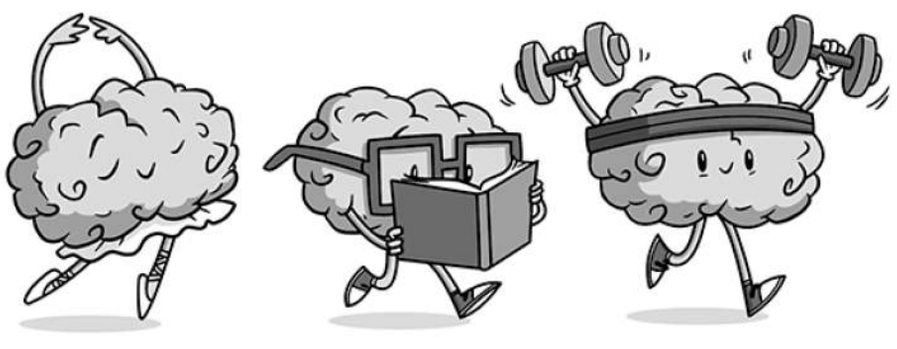
HOW HABITS ARE FORMED IN OUR BRAINS

Habits are formed when we do something enough times that it becomes automatic. Say, for instance, you want to start a new habit of drinking a small glass of water before bed. (I love to do this, as it helps me sleep better.) The first few evenings, you may forget and need reminding. But after you've had your drink a few evenings in a row, your brain will automatically start to remind you to fill up your water glass at bedtime, without you having to think about it. Amazing!

This applies to anything we want to build into our lives, so the possibilities are endless. The aim is to make our happy habits **automatic**, so we do them every single day but without much effort. Over the coming days, weeks and months, these happy habits could make a huge difference to your life.

Imagine learning a new language or sports skill. The hardest part is at the start when our brain finds the new task more challenging. This is temporary – we just need to push through and keep trying, because it always gets easier. Soon, with enough repetition it becomes easy and can even start being fun.

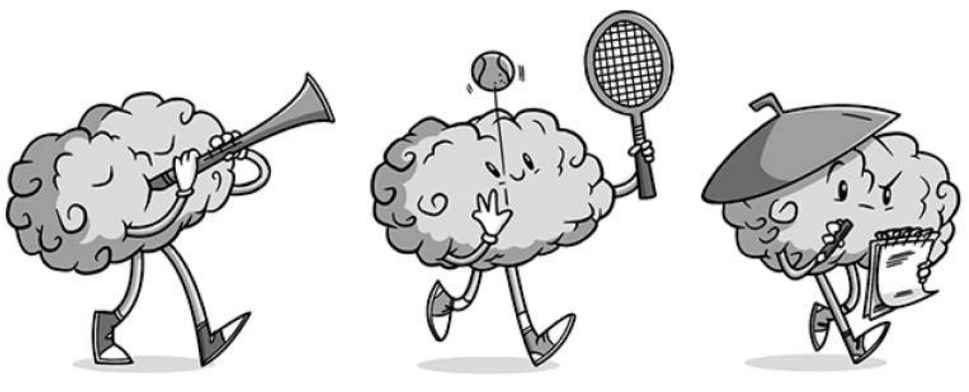
Habits are happy because, with some work, they make the hard things in life fun and fun things easier (as we don't have to spend so long thinking about how we will get things done).



Even better, our whole brains are capable of something *amazing*, called **neuroplasticity**.

This is the brain's ability to change itself based on what we do and learn. The brain contains billions of tiny cells called **neurons**, which send each other messages. Each time a new message is sent, it creates a pathway in our brain. The more a certain pathway is used, the stronger it becomes. And this is why when we learn something new, it's hard at first, but the more we do it, the easier it becomes. Our brain is literally changing a tiny bit every time – and that's why our happy habits make lots of small changes that result in big, brainy progress.

As babies, this is how we learn to walk and talk, and it continues throughout our lives as we develop new skills.



Your brain is always actively learning: the neurons are firing off messages, and the pathways are getting stronger the more you do something. The possibilities are endless, so imagine them.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN HAPPY HABITS – AS MANY AS YOU LIKE

In this book, we're going to be looking at all sorts of habits. Habits to do with movement, creativity, friendships, nature and more. The habits you want to focus on should be connected to how *you* want to live. The way *you* want to feel, the things *you* want to be able to do and the life *you* want to have. All of the habits in this book are just as important and valid as each other, and some may feel more relevant to you and how you want to live than the rest. All of which is absolutely OK! Just remember that progress doesn't always happen in a straight line though, so if you have a bad day, a bad week or even a bad month you can always start over again.

You can start by focusing on any section that you find interesting. If you are the future scuba-diving marine biologist, you might want to look at movement (gotta be a good swimmer to keep up with the dolphins) and planning (got to make time to study those fish!) first.

But choose whichever works for you – **building new habits is a personal thing**. Once you get the hang of one or two and you've got into the habit of creating new habits, you can try some others. You'll be able to apply everything you've learned about habits themselves to whatever new skill you want to develop.
Because it's the start of a journey that could take you *anywhere.* It starts with the step of deciding to make a habit of good habits, and it ends up wherever your dreams are.

So say it with me: I'm ready to make my dreams come true, a little bit at a time, with happy, healthy habits.

Let's go.

Oh . . . you can take off the flippers; you don't need them right now.

